

By Steve Ford

How many people - design engineers, contract specialists, surveyors, real estate appraisers, hard-hat construction workers - would it take to build a new rail bridge over Raleigh's Capital Boulevard?

How much would the bridge cost? And where would the money come from?

These are the sort of questions that help frame the debate over President Obama's proposal to try to make some headway against the stubborn economic slump that has cost millions of Americans their jobs, and in many cases their homes and their chance for a brighter future.

Obama sees investment in the nation's physical inventory - roads, rail lines, public buildings and so forth - as a key tactic. Upgrading that infrastructure creates jobs, by no means all of them short-term. And it leaves a legacy of projects whose value will extend over time.

That clearly would be the case with the Raleigh rail overpass. At this stage the project is merely a concept, and it has no endorsement from the Obama team. But it's the state Department of Transportation's latest attempt to crack a riddle involving better access into and out of downtown for a new generation of fast trains.

It thus could be a critical link in the proposed high-speed rail corridor stretching north from Raleigh and eventually on down to Charlotte as well. This is infrastructure that can help Raleigh and the Triangle, as they grow, maintain their renowned livability by making inter-city travel more efficient.

Ah, but yes, the money. Passenger rail investment has many critics, some who argue that in terms of the numbers of people who might ever want to take the train somewhere, it just doesn't make sense. That argument ignores the "build it and they'll come" syndrome. When rail service is convenient, punctual and reasonably priced, it begins to dawn on many people that it can be

plausible alternative to flying or driving.

There's another line of attack that cuts across Obama's entire infrastructure agenda. It reflects diehard opposition in Congress to any increased federal spending - tea party-fueled opposition that surely has many Republican lawmakers vowing that any spending to create jobs, as Obama wants, will take place over their dead bodies. They might also get some political bounce out of making him look ineffective.

On his visit to Raleigh Wednesday, the president didn't talk up rail spending as vigorously he has in the past. But his \$447 billion jobs program does envision \$4 billion for high-speed corridor work. The question is whether the corridors, with red signals flashing on Capitol Hill, are still alive anywhere except in the minds of those in the White House and of those who convened in Charlotte for a conference early in the week.

As it happens, our own **U.S. Rep. David Price**, the veteran Democrat from Chapel Hill, was the keynote speaker at the event, which was the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' annual meeting devoted to rail issues.

Price made a full-throated pitch for the benefits of high-speed rail investments, which he said would improve mobility for both goods and people and create 34,000 jobs for a \$1 billion outlay.

As to the opposition, **Price** said, according to a text of his remarks: "The main argument seems to be that deficits and recession mean we shouldn't spend money on new things. But that is exactly the kind of thinking that is causing the recovery to be stopped in its tracks! As every small business owner who has been hurt by lack of credit over the last few years will tell you, you have to spend money to make money. The key is to figure out which investments will yield the greatest return. I believe high speed rail is one of them."

Republican appropriations chiefs in the House are backing a bill that, Price explained, would simply zero out any spending for high speed rail. Funding for Amtrak also would take a big hit - wonderful news, surely, for all the riders who have made Raleigh one of the busiest Amtrak stops in the Southeast.

Obama doesn't shy away from the reality that his jobs program has a price tag, and he thinks the cost should be covered by closing tax loopholes and raising rates on those who could best afford to pay. So should someone in Kalamazoo who's high up on the income ladder be expected to help foot the bill for better rail service to places like Raleigh, Cary and Durham?

Think about it this way: What they're really paying for is work - work for people who desperately need it so they can keep their homes and feed their kids. Does this amount to redistributing income? To a degree, of course it does. But it's a sorry society that lets some people languish without jobs while others, with plenty of money coming in, pay taxes at rates that have been cut, cut, cut. Or as one could say, it's a hell of way to run a railroad.